

*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. It is right for me to feel this way about you all, because I hold you in my heart, for you are all partakers with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus. And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.*

Have you noticed it? We had a little discussion in the office this week, and we all seem to agree that there are more people putting up lights and decorations this year. I have noticed it in my neighbourhood. Oh, I suppose it could be that new people have moved into the neighbourhood who are more inclined to decorate than the previous owners. But it does seem that in the midst of the darkness of our world and in the ongoing uncertainty and restrictions of COVID that (as the song says) we need a little Christmas, right this very minute. Actually, I think we need a little Advent! We need the hope and peace that comes as we look forward in joyful anticipation of the Lord's coming among us. We need something that makes us feel more celebration and less the 'blah' of life. Then, when the time is right, we can continue celebrating the blessings of Christmas itself.

My wife may now understand why I was eager to see the garland around the altar rail this week, or the few simple decorations we have around the church. The next thing, of course, is the Christmas tree—and if anyone wants to help with that, we would truly appreciate it! All the decorations that beautify this house of God remind us of the coming Saviour and the reason for the season as we rejoice in the Saviour who is born to save us. Our green garland is a symbol of life, as is the evergreen tree. The chrismons we put on the tree have symbols that testify to the Christ. The circle that forms the wreath is a symbol of eternity and of the eternal Lord who comes into our time to save us. Lights remind us of Him, who is the Light of the World.

If there were no lights or garland or wreaths we would still have other decorations all around us that are even more beautiful than lit trees or festive garland. The brightest decorations in this church are not found in the altarware or the paraments and banners or anything else that is made by the hands of people. Yes, we do have the brassware, furnishings and the other items that are not just decor, but testimonies and teaching tools. Many of these things have their roots in the furnishings that God Himself designed for use in the tabernacle and then later in the temple. Still, the painting on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel or the regal works of gold and silver that adorn the great cathedrals can't match the beauty of the decorations that fill this church this morning. The most glorious decorations that will ever adorn the church of God are found in the beautiful hearts of God's faithful people, who, through their lives in Christ, show forth the true glory of God, to the praise of His splendour.

There is nothing so beautiful in all the world as the truly faithful Christian heart. What St. Peter says to Christian wives can be applied to all God's people: *Do not let your adorning be external—the braiding of hair, the wearing of gold, or the putting on of clothing— but let your adorning be the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God's sight is very precious.* (1 Peter 3:3-4 - ESV) Paul sees that kind of beauty in the Philippian Christians. In our text, Paul expresses his thanks to God for the faithful hearts of these dear saints. He sees what God has begun in them, and is sure *that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.* He is so grateful and encouraged by their *partnership in the gospel from the first day until now.* In his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul speaks of this church and its people, encouraging the Corinthians to be like the people of Philippi. In many ways, Paul points to the Philippians and says to others, "This is what Christians are like. Look at all the Gospel has brought to them and all that it means to them. This is the life that brings real beauty to the church of Christ."

In the years that it has been my privilege and joy to serve as your pastor, I have seen how you, dear saints of God, have taken His Word of truth and life to heart. I, too, rejoice as Paul does, and thank God for you and for *your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now.* All the good that happens among us—all the growth that takes place; all the mutual consolation and encouragement we bring to one another; all the souls who have been touched through the Gospel and the hearts that have come to know the peace and joy that is ours through Christ alone—this is only possible because God adorns His church. The brightest decorations in this church come from God the Holy Spirit at work, and through Him alone. Isaiah said: *I will greatly*

*rejoice in the Lord; my soul shall exult in my God, for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation; he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself like a priest with a beautiful headdress, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.* (Isaiah 61:10 - ESV) The psalmist says: *For the Lord takes pleasure in his people; he adorns the humble with salvation.* (Psalm 149:4 - ESV) God takes some rather unattractive raw materials—our sinful hearts, and goes to work to make us something different. In our Old Testament lesson, Malachi says that the Lord *“will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, and they will bring offerings in righteousness to the LORD.”* (Malachi 3:3, ESV) He purifies us and makes us something beautiful and wonderful. He washes us clean with the blood of Christ—that blood shed for us on the cross, as the Saviour of the World gives His life in our place. He shapes us into something new and wonderful as we are baptized into Christ, and into His death and His resurrection. As the Spirit works in us with the forgiveness and life that come through Christ, we are made to be like Christ in our thinking, feeling and our actions.

God began this work in us, and He continues to work to make us something beautiful in His sight. The Gospel at work and your life of faith in Christ brings a real beauty to this church. When I have the opportunity to visit with new people who come to worship, they may mention something in the building that caught their attention. But more than anything else, I will hear that the people of the church were warm and welcoming. To put it another way, what people remember most about this church is the beautiful, faithful members. May God help us so that we continue and strive to keep doing this! You shine with a unique light of glory when your faith in the dying and rising Christ is evident in all that you do. Isn't that what Jesus told us to do? *Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.* (Matthew 5:16 - ESV)

But, before you start to pat yourself on the back too much, don't forget that it is only by God's grace in Jesus Christ that you have this beauty, and don't forget that the beauty of the faithful heart can be lost in the dirt and ugliness of sin. When I was working on my Christmas decorations this year, I was frustrated that three strands of lights on my eavestrough were shorting out. I have a string of lights out on my tree, and while I've tried to find the bulb that typically is the culprit, it must be something more, like a fuse. There were other decorations that are looking old and tired. Some can be restored with a good cleaning; others need repair or paint; still others, because of what they are, cannot be brought back to their original beauty.

That is not the case with the wonderful decorations that God Himself has set in His church. As Scripture says: *He has made everything beautiful in its time.* (Ecclesiastes 3:11 - ESV) We remember in these days the good news of John the Baptist, whom God sent to prepare the way for the coming of the Saviour. Our Gospel lesson said that the people were in expectation, wondering if John was the Christ. John assured them: *“I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.”* (Luke 3:16, ESV) John knew that Christ was coming, and that He makes us something beautiful by His grace. John would soon point to Jesus and say: *“Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”* (John 1:29, ESV) That dear Lamb of God who died to take away sin and who rose to give us life continues to be with us. When we fall, when we get bruised and soiled by sin, we come with repentant hearts, and He cleanses us again. He restores us, giving us that beauty that radiates from a faithful, trusting heart. More than that, He continues to work in us by the Holy Spirit, so that we may be more like Him in all that we do. That is why Paul says: *it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.*

There is always room, even in the best of congregations, for love to grow. We want to be growing in love—that love for one another that reaches out in forgiveness when there are hurts; the love that cares and supports one another. We also want to struggle against the sinful inclinations of the heart that would keep us from being ‘pure and blameless’. To do that, we need the encouragement of His Word and the strength of the heavenly food we receive in the Lord's Supper this morning. As we grow in the Word, we are able to discern what is best, and that helps us do what is best for one another, bringing forth the fruits of righteousness in our lives.

My dear people, loved by God, I thank Him for all that He has done in you and through you. I thank Him for the beauty He brings to His church through your faith and life. The true beauty of this church is not found in the decorations we have during Advent and Christmas, or at any other season of the year. It is not found in the architecture or the sacred vessels that have been dedicated to the Lord's service. No, the brightest decorations in this church are you, God's people, as you live in the joy and power of your baptism to be all that God has called you to be. The brightest decoration in this church is the faith of the people who know God's Word and gladly hear and learn it. The beauty of the church is in its people, who show to the world what Christ has done and is doing for us. Shine brightly, dear Christian, in this sacred season, and let Christ in you bring beauty to all who see your faith. Amen.